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8. THE FUTURE IS PAST, THE PRESENT CANNOT BE FIXED: KEN LOACH AND THE CRISIS

Martin Hall

As the contemporary version of the crisis brought on by the financial crash of 2008 reaches its second decade, the cinema of Ken Loach presents something of a conundrum for the politically radical spectator. Since his return to frequent feature film production as the Cold War began to end in 1990, his work has predominantly been focused in two areas: the everyday struggle for existence in the contemporary world: for example, *Riff-Raff* (1991), *Ladybird, Ladybird* (1994), *Sweet Sixteen* (2001), *It's a Free World* (2007) and *I, Daniel Blake* (2016); and the historical, revolutionary struggles of working people against capitalism and imperialism, such as *Land and Freedom* (1995), *Carla's Song* (1996) and *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2006). There have also been documentaries made for television, notably *The Flickering Flame* (1996) and *Spirit of '45* (2013).

In this chapter, the defeatism of the British left since the 1980s and the positions taken by its reformist wing following that period, one in which Francis Fukuyama (1992) pronounced 'the end of history', will be posited as a seam running through Loach's contemporary cinema. A binary is set up by Loach's films during this period: a Gramscian War of Manoeuvre is represented in the revolutionary time of the historical films, but in the contemporary period texts, there is no complementary War of Position, which is the form that the struggle takes in order to fight the hegemony of bourgeois culture; instead, we have a working class that is atomised and ground down, with any victories presented being on an individual level.[1] Moreover, as the neoliberal model has lurched

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further into crisis since 2008, and as social movements attempting to combat neoliberalism have risen since the Seattle World Trade Organization protests of 1999, no change in Loach's cinema can be discerned. In order to ascertain why this might be, Alain Badiou's work on the constitution of the subject will be used to suggest that what is missing from Loach's worldview is faith in what Badiou calls 'the Idea of Communism', which he situates as one 'related to the destiny of generic humanity' (2009a: 79). We may more commonly refer to this as a grand narrative. Through this analysis, a case will be made that the films of the director considered to be the most left-wing in Britain show no faith in a contemporary transformative paradigm.

Moreover, Mark Fisher's concept of 'capitalist realism' will be of use in specifying exactly what relationship Loach's contemporary subjects have to the present, a cinematic time that is haunted by the ghosts of the past and of lost futures. Fisher suggests that late capitalism is infused with 'the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible to even *imagine* a coherent alternative to it' (2009: 2). Furthermore, borrowing Derrida's neologism of hauntology, Fisher writes at length in a later volume (2014) of the various ways in which contemporary popular culture is haunted by what *might* have been. This untimely position is represented by a number of Loach's subjects in his films set in the present. For Badiou, the time of the subject is the future anterior, which he considers to be 'what supports belief' (2006: 418) in the subject; what *will* have been. The gap between these two conceptions of the future corresponds to the differing positions taken by Loach in his historical and contemporary films: his historical subjects are fixed by choices, and anterior reflection cannot bring those struggles into the present. Much has been made in popular discourse and in the social democratic imagination of the ways in which the various twentieth-century revolutions and attempts at anti-capitalist societies failed. There is an anterior inflection to this, seen from our contemporary situation: the revolution will not have taken place; instead, we get 1989 and the supposed 'end of history'.

It must be stated at this stage that capitalist realism does have antecedents and can perhaps be seen as a recurring thread throughout the crisis, and, indeed, before it. At a moment when the first creaks in the social democratic post-war consensus and the Keynesian model were yet to be felt, Theodor Adorno, in a 1964 conversation with Ernst Bloch on utopian longing, stated that 'what people have lost subjectively in regard to consciousness is very simply the capability to imagine the totality as something that could be completely different' (cited in Bloch 1988: 3–4). Adorno's proto-postmodernism hints at a problem with the future conception of 'the end of history'; namely, that perhaps we have been here before, suggesting that the teleological stasis of late capitalism is less determined than Fukuyama, postmodernism and even Fisher would have

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us believe. Economically, the consensus would grind to a halt and force a reaction after Richard Nixon's unpegging of the US dollar from gold in 1971 and the subsequent breaking up of the Bretton Woods system that had been set up in 1944. Following that, the Yom Kippur War and the oil crisis brought about by the oil embargo of October 1973 saw a dramatic rise in the price of oil and attempts to freeze wages by the British government. The reaction was the beginning of the neoliberal era, though few were calling it that then. What is the case is that the attempt to recalibrate the relationship between labour and capital in favour of the latter was set in motion at that point, after the relative gains of the working class in the West in the previous sixty years or so.

Loach, of course, was working during the beginning of the collapse of the post-war consensus. In the early to mid-1970s he made one feature film, *Family Life* (1971), and one major television series for the BBC, *Days of Hope* (1975). The binary this chapter is setting up can be seen coming into view during this period, which suggests that the tendency outlined in the previous paragraph was in genesis here. *Family Life* is a fairly typical social realist film about a young woman being forced into an abortion, while *Days of Hope* concentrates on the period from the middle of the First World War to the General Strike of 1926, seen through the lens of one family. Jacob Leigh (2002: 91–113) is of the view that the radicalism of the series[2] – and of much of Loach's work during the late 1960s and early 1970s – can be attributed to the influence of screenwriter Jim Allen, whose revolutionary politics permeate Loach's television at this point. Allen would also work with Loach on a series of feature films in the 1990s and will be returned to below, specifically in the discussion of *Land and Freedom*. For now, it is enough to suggest that a split between the revolutionary and the despairing subject can be seen in germ form at this stage in Loach's career.

In terms of Loach's response to the most recent manifestation of the crisis from 2008 onwards, which was set in train by the collapse of the US subprime mortgage market and the consequent crisis of international banking, what is of note is the extent to which it can be argued that he presents a contemporary-set cinema that would like to fix capitalism, but cannot reform it, never mind overturn it. We can suggest that this parallels to some degree the response from nominally social democrat governments in much of the West, which was to pump money into the economy via quantitative easing and to prop up the banking system via nationalisation; in other words the socialisation of debt in a world governed by the privatisation of profit. Along with this in Britain has come nearly a decade of austerity, which has seen a further transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich, and from the public to the private. While Loach, as a socialist, clearly does not support such measures and has aligned himself strongly with the leadership of the Labour Party in Britain since Jeremy Corbyn was elected in 2015, it is still noteworthy that his cinema post-2008 has

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not presented a subject who has the means to organise collectively and effect change. Loach is not alone in this: a quick survey of film-makers considered to be on the left throughout Europe would produce similar results. However, where Loach differs is in his continuing adherence to the Trotskyist tradition, unlike, for example, Béla Tarr or Michael Haneke, which would lead the spectator to expect the continuing representation of the revolutionary subject. Prior to analysing a number of Loach's films in detail, let us briefly consider what has happened politically since 2008, in order to provide greater context for what I will suggest is key to understanding Loach's recent cinema.

Badiou names 'the short century' (2007: 31) as the one that begins with the Russian Revolution in the middle of the First World War and ends with the termination of the Cold War.[3] This century is in opposition to the one in which neoliberalism has risen, which he describes as one which 'calls for renunciation, resignation, the lesser evil, together with moderation, the end of humanity as a spiritual force, and the critique of "grand narratives"' (2007: 31). This world, which Badiou calls an 'intervallic period' (2012: 38), and which has held sway since the 1980s in the West, appears to be drawing to an end. Since the crisis of 2008 and the seismic shocks that it set in train, there has been, to varying degrees, a return to oppositional politics and a subsequent rise of the left and the right. With the exception of Emmanuel Macron's in France and to a degree Angela Merkel's in Germany, governments of the centre that propose a third-way, supposedly non-ideological politics of managerialism are thin on the ground. Instead, we have seen the rise and failure in Greece of Syriza's challenge to the European Union and austerity; the election of Trump; Bolsonaro, who can legitimately be called a fascist, taking power in Brazil; the rise of Corbyn in Britain; the contested space that is Brexit; the rise of Sanders in the US; the election of fascists to parliament in Germany for the first time since the Second World War; an alliance between populists and the far right in Italy; the continuing drive rightwards of some of the countries on the eastern periphery of the European Union; and an independence insurgency in Catalonia, of varying political colours.

In terms of the rise of the left specifically, there has been a notable uptake in political engagement in a variety of Marxist and non-Marxist movements since the aforementioned protests in Seattle, taking in Occupy, Stop the War and Black Lives Matter along the way. This phenomenon has begun to be analysed in a variety of ways in recent publications by, among others, Jodi Dean (2016), Chris Nineham (2017) and Liz Fekete (2018). We are returning to a world of division, one in which the grand narratives of yesteryear are proving themselves alive and well. Furthermore, for the first time since the 1980s, it can be suggested that 'the long night of the left is drawing to a close' (Douzinas and Žižek 2010: vii). This is the disavowed context in which Loach presents his contemporary subjects.

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Let us look at Loach's historical cinema first, in order to situate the War of Manoeuvre in his films that present the subject of Badiou's short century. Since the end of the Cold War Loach has made four historical feature films that present class struggle to varying degrees: in *Land and Freedom* we have the Republican side of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, seen through the eyes of a volunteer from the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). He is assigned to the POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista), or the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification, an anti-Stalinist party formed as an alliance of left communist Trotskyists and the right opposition in 1935, though it quickly broke with Trotsky, who did not support it. In *Carla's Song*, which is set in 1987, a much more recent struggle is represented, namely that of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua against the US-backed Contras. *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* takes place during the Irish War of Independence (1919–21) and the civil war that followed after the island was partitioned. *Jimmy's Hall* (2014) is set in the Ireland of the early 1930s and concerns the deportation of revolutionary Jimmy Gralton (Barry Ward) after his revivification of the eponymous hall, which he uses as a centre of political education and culture, in so doing incurring the wrath of both Church and state. Each of the films also has a romance plot, with *Carla's Song* making it the central driver of the narrative. I will concentrate on *Land and Freedom* and *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, as they are the texts that are concerned with grand historical struggle and indeed grand narratives, specifically communism.

Eleftheria Rania Kosmidou, in a discussion of *Land and Freedom*, makes a persuasive case that 'Loach's melancholy and reflective nostalgia . . . makes him an allegorist commentating on the present' (2012: 56). This notion of commenting on the present can be extended to all four of the historical films, though I do not agree with the notion that Loach is predominantly using allegory as a form; rather, I am suggesting principally that his historical texts comment on the present via their presenting of the struggle as past, and as contingent upon historically specific conditions that the texts posit are no longer present; what will have been. The reason for this is set out in specific scenes. The exception that proves the rule among the historical films in formal terms, *Land and Freedom* does make concrete this 'commenting on the present' through the framing device of David Carr's (Ian Hart) death in the Liverpool of 1995, with his granddaughter (Suzanne Maddock) looking through his papers, which takes us to the first flashback, until we end with his funeral and the mourners giving the raised fist salute. Still, the raised fist functions as little more than an exercise in nostalgia; a symbol of mourning from the present.[4] What is much more common is the representation of a political crossroads and the failure of the revolutionary path taken by some, and the victory of the compromising and reformist path taken by others, leading to the present situation. Let us look at the scenes in our chosen films that present this historical moment, and consider

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what this tells us about Loach's political alignment. The scenes will be summarised initially, prior to being subject to a comparative analysis.

The scene in *Land and Freedom* that presents this crossroads, and which in twelve minutes acts as a miniature of schisms within the left regarding strategy and tactics that are still present to this day, is the debate on land collectivisation that takes place in the recently commandeered house of a capitalist. It commences just prior to halfway through the film, functions as its apex and is its longest scene. Non-professional actors are used by Loach in this scene, and they espouse their actual positions regarding the conflict (Porton 1996: 30), which is still very much part of general discourse in Spain. This is another reason why it is qualitatively different from the rest of the film.

A peasant woman makes the case for collectivisation, which is mostly met with approval; the lone dissenting voice among the Spanish people present belongs to Pepe, a tenant farmer. After other villagers speak, the POUM militia members, who include anarchists as well as socialists and communists, are invited to speak, and the divide regarding what is to be done is presented via Lawrence (Tom Gilroy), an American volunteer, who speaks against, essentially presenting the Communist Party perspective. Scottish, German and French comrades are in favour, and present Trotskyist and anarcho-syndicalist positions: the revolution must happen now; do not try and appease capitalist countries in the hope of support. This is a retort to Lawrence, who has just reminded the room that only Russia and Mexico support the Republic; in terms of the rest of the world, he tells them, 'they are capitalist countries and if you want their help, you have to moderate your slogans, as you're scaring them away'.

David takes a pragmatic view that winning the war must be the priority and does not particularly come down on either side, though he is closer to Lawrence's position because of his own affiliation with the CPGB. We see this later as he joins Lawrence in the International Brigade, and finds himself fighting against anarchists and revolutionaries who hold the same positions as his former comrades. However, following on from an interchange with a young soldier telling lies about the militia, he rejoins it and rips up his Party card. The villagers vote and the motion to collectivise the land is carried. However, it is the road laid out by Lawrence that is eventually taken by the Republican movement, as the Communist Party represses the POUM and forces them to surrender, with Lawrence being part of the brigade that does so, leading to the death of anarchist Blanca (Rosana Pastor), with whom David is in love. He returns to England.

To turn to *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, Donal Ó Drisceoil, in an article responding to right-wing critiques of the film, suggests that it discusses 'the "what-might-have-beens" of the Irish revolution, not in a romantic, counterfactual manner, but by highlighting or foregrounding spurned radical political and historical possibilities' (2009: 10). While the film does present lost possibilities,

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I am arguing that this 'might have been' is actually, from the 2006 perspective of the text, a case of 'what will have been'. It is most clearly seen in a section that functions as a companion to the one in *Land and Freedom* discussed above. It is seven minutes long and follows on from the showing of a newsreel that announces the Anglo-Irish Treaty, which proposes to partition the country, create an Irish Free State as a British dominion, and which requires every member of the putative new parliament to swear an oath of allegiance to the British crown. In it the two sides of the IRA that will fight in the oncoming Irish Civil War, with the government led by Michael Collins on one side and the anti-treaty rebels led by Éamon de Valera on the other, are shown making their case. Teddy O'Donovan (Pádraic Delaney), the brother of the film's main protagonist, Damien O'Donovan (Cillian Murphy), argues that the treaty is the best they can hope for, and that the alternative, in the words of British prime minister David Lloyd George, is 'immediate and terrible war'. Damien, Dan (Liam Cunningham), Finbar (Damien Kearney) and others all explicitly state that they are very near to what they have fought for and that they can't stop now. More to the point, they make the case that they are remaining loyal to the constitution of the first Dáil Éireann in 1919, which was formed by the elected Sinn Féin members from the 1918 General Election in the UK, who had refused to take their seats and had instead formed a parliament and declared an Irish Republic in Dublin. Dan reads from the constitution of the Dáil, which he carries in his pocket. It states that the nation's sovereignty extended over all of its resources. From this he makes the socialist case that 'this means all of us here and all of us in this country own every bit of this country'. He then argues that ratification of the treaty would lead to an Ireland in which only the flag and the accents of the powerful would change. He is applauded and the meeting ends. The brothers fight on different sides in the ensuing civil war and the film ends with Damien's death by a firing squad under the command of Teddy.

Prior to this, this split between what from a social democratic perspective would be called realpolitik and revolutionary struggle had been foregrounded in the text in a scene half an hour earlier, in which an Irish court acting on the authority of the Dáil had ruled that a local businessman charging exorbitant interest on a loan to a peasant must pay her a reparation. Teddy and what will become the pro-treaty faction run after the man to assuage him, as he has been paying for a lot of the weapons that they have been smuggling into the country. Teddy is hauled back into the court by the all-woman judiciary. They, Damien, Dan and others argue that the court must be respected and the ruling upheld and that the poor not being exploited is more important than keeping the local elite happy.

The similarities between the scenes in the two films are clear, and function from the present as historical lessons for the contemporary left. Kosmidou suggests that both texts are predicated upon how 'a split within a potentially

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revolutionary movement prevents a radical social transformation' (2012: 86). While this is true, both scenes also contain traces, especially in *Land and Freedom*, of the revolutionary event of the twentieth century where such a split did lead to the most radical social transformation: the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia. For reasons of space, I will be brief here. Following the February Revolution a variety of groups took different positions regarding what to do next in terms of social organisation; at times, even the revolutionary Bolsheviks made the case that the time was not right for the workers to seize power via the workers' councils, or soviets. There were both theoretical and practical reasons behind this. Marx and Engels had made clear that societies needed to follow a feudalist and monarchist period with a bourgeois democratic one, which had not happened in Russia; in practical terms, Russia's working class was not considered large enough or advanced enough in terms of class consciousness to take power. Still, when the time came, Lenin, Trotsky and the other Bolshevik leaders made the decision to argue that the revolutionaries must seize power. This knowledge underpins the interventions made by many militia members in *Land and Freedom*, and would have been, of course, very recent in the minds of the anti-treaty socialists in *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*. Both films look in both temporal directions.

Loach very clearly sides with the anti-treaty side and with the anti-Stalinist position of the POUM. He has stated that his and Allen's identification with the POUM was based on the latter being 'anti-Stalinist Marxists' (cited in Porton 1996: 30). Later in the same interview, having been asked about parallels with *Days of Hope*, particularly in terms of the betrayal of the left, he suggests that 'it's the story of the century, really, that there is this great force which is capable of change but it doesn't always lead to something effective' (Porton 1996: 30). The positions taken by Loach in these texts allied to this comment raise a question regarding his contemporary films: why is he not prepared to take the aleatory gamble necessary to espouse radical change? Badiou's work on the subject of the Event may provide some answers.

For Badiou, the militant subject is created through fidelity to the aleatory, revolutionary Event, which is a fundamental break in the situation, and allows that which has not been counted, what has been disavowed – in this case, the working class – to take their place as subjects of history, provided they take a gamble. His examples include the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution, the Cultural Revolution in China and sometimes May '68. As suggested above, Badiou situates the temporality of the subject of the Event in the future anterior. Due to its conditionality, history is always yet to come in the anterior register. However, for Loach, what we instead have in the historical films is what will have been, seen from the fixed present perfect of the failure of the present. We can consider the reasons for this via Badiou's thinking regarding the different types of subject position that can be created by the Event: his thought

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goes through some stages, but by the time of *Logics of Worlds* (2009b: 62–5), there are three – faithful, reactive and obscure – to which he adds a fourth – the resurrected subject – which is essentially a reactivated version of the first, and which allows for the subject of the Event to be created across time.

In Badiou's terms, the subject of Loach's historical films is not reactive, as such a subject declares the opposition between capitalism and communism to be wrong, and instead works to save democracy from dictatorship of both left and right. He is certainly not an obscure subject, one that disavows the aforementioned opposition, via the blocking from view of the evental trace with something presented as universal that is not – God or race being two examples – leading to fascism. Rather, in his historical films, Loach presents a view aligned to some degree with the faithful subject, but one infused with melancholia, in the sense that the melancholic subject clings to that which was lost – the revolution – and cannot therefore mourn. What we are arguing to be clearly missing in his contemporary-set films is the resurrected subject; instead, the spectator is presented with a despairing, mournful subject, one either permeated with capitalist realism or destroyed by it. Let us turn to those films now, in order to consider why this might be so.

I will concentrate on *I, Daniel Blake* and *It's a Free World*, in order to provide a temporal framework that is as close as possible to the current manifestation of the crisis. Both films were written by Paul Laverty, Loach's frequent collaborator since *Carla's Song*, as was *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*. While a concentration on screenwriters can be said to be overly reductionist, it is worth commenting that Laverty does not share Allen's background in revolutionary politics. Having begun training as a priest, he then worked in Nicaragua in the 1980s documenting human rights abuses. Perhaps something of a tendency to identify problems without recognising any need for systemic change, allied to faith in redemption and atonement, can be seen in his films with Loach. *It's a Free World* concerns Angie (Kierston Wareing), a single mother working for a company that organises the transfer of foreign labour into Britain. After unfairly losing her job, she decides to use her contacts to set up her own business with her friend Rose (Juliet Ellis). She is let down by her financial backers, falls out with Rose and her family, starts giving work to illegal workers, and is threatened with violence if she does not pay the wages owed to the men, who are predominantly Polish, culminating in the temporary kidnapping of Jamie (Joe Siffleet), her son, and an ultimatum from three masked men. The film ends with her in Eastern Europe attempting to import more workers, her lesson clearly not learned.

I, Daniel Blake presents the world of benefit sanctions and fit-to-work assessments. The eponymous character (Dave Johns) is a Newcastle joiner recovering from a heart attack. He is denied disability benefit and considered fit to return to work, despite his doctor telling him that he is in no fit state to

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do so. While at the benefits office querying this and finding out about claiming Jobseekers' Allowance, he comes to the aid of newly arrived Londoner Katie (Hayley Squires), a single mother who is being removed from the Jobcentre by security, having lost her temper after being told that she is being sanctioned for lateness. The two become friends. Katie is caught shoplifting and is forced to turn to prostitution to survive. Daniel turns down work at a garden centre on the advice of his doctor, and is reprimanded by the Jobcentre for not trying hard enough to find work. While waiting for his appeal date, he sprays 'I, Daniel Blake demand my appeal date before I starve' on the wall of the building, is arrested, and becomes depressed. On the day of his appeal, having seen the people who will decide his case, he becomes anxious, suffers another heart attack and dies. Katie reads out what he had written for his appeal at the funeral.

Yet again, pivotal scenes in the films present a different world to the one in which they are set. However, they do not directly present a road not travelled; rather, they describe and present a past that is mourned; what might have been. I will describe them initially, prior to making another comparative analysis from within the prism of Badiou's varying subject positions, those which I am adding to it, and Fisher's capitalist realism. In *It's a Free World*, it is the character of Geoff (Colin Coughlin), Angie's father, who is the memorial voice, though it is social democracy, rather than revolutionary struggle, that is being mourned.

Following a scene in which Angie and Geoff have accompanied Jamie into school to discuss his having attacked another pupil, the three of them go to the park, and the adults talk, while Jamie plays with some other boys. The scene is two-thirds into the film, and slightly less than three minutes long, though it encapsulates the changes that thirty years of neoliberalism have brought. It begins with Angie complaining about constantly being judged, accompanied with her suggesting that her father ought to be proud of her for setting up her own business. He replies, 'What shall I congratulate you on?' Geoff then discusses the world that will await Jamie when he leaves school, where he will be competing with 'Kosovans, Romanians, on starvation wages'. Angie thinks he is being racist and suggests that he should join the National Front. Geoff reacts with anger, calling them 'lying bastards'. Angie, speaking from a position of how immigration benefits capital, rather than anti-racism, mistakes her father's position here. His is the voice of labourism, as is made clear in the remainder of the conversation. He talks about the effects on the immigrants' home countries, when 'school teachers, nurses and doctors' are working as waiters in the UK for starvation wages, finishing off by stating: 'No one's getting anything out of this but the bosses and the governors. No one else is smiling.' Angie retorts 'consumers are smiling', in so doing parroting the positions of successive Tory and New Labour administrations, who privilege this nebulous economic

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category and reify it as a discrete entity separate from the rest of society. After getting frustrated by her father repeatedly asking her if she is paying them the minimum wage, Angie responds by talking about how he's had the same job for thirty years, while she has already had thirty jobs and been treated badly in all of them. What is of interest here is that she puts this down to individual choice, a matter of how she and her father are different, rather than an effect of political decisions. Geoff responds by suggesting that all she cares about is her and Jamie, while 'the rest of the world can go to hell'. The scene ends with her telling him that 'It's a big world out there. Do you think anyone gives a shit?'

I, Daniel Blake functions a little differently in structural terms. There is no one scene that sets out the contemporary situation in contrast to the past; rather, a number of scenes present a binary between the dignity of labour and community on one hand, and the suffocating, incomprehensible bureaucracy of neoliberalism on the other. I will discuss two of them. Following his discovery that Katie is working as a prostitute, and her plea to him to leave her alone and not show her any more love, Daniel goes to the Jobcentre to sign on, whereupon it is made clear that he has not been looking for work. He sets out his reasons via a discussion of what a waste of everyone's time it is to look for non-existent jobs that he cannot take because of his condition. Ann (Kate Rutter), the case-worker, is sympathetic to his predicament and begs him not to sign off, as he may end up on the street. He gets up, goes outside and begins the protest described above. He is cheered on by the public, in particular by a Scotsman, who offers him his coat and berates the police who take him away: he shouts, 'You should be arresting the wankers who came up with sanctions', and singles out Iain Duncan Smith, the Tory Secretary of State for Work and Pensions who was behind the new system.

Daniel's funeral contains the scene that most clearly presents the film's political position: Katie's reading of Daniel's appeal. It is a clear statement against neoliberalisation and atomisation, and in favour of social democracy; a paean to a world that Daniel had not quite realised had gone, prior to his enforced demise. The speech talks about not being a customer or service user, nor a scrounger or shirker; it states that he paid his way in life and doesn't expect charity; that he is a man and demands his rights. It is tempting to suggest that this voice from the grave represents the death of the world in which Daniel had grown up: the post-war consensus, with its safety net, 'from the cradle to the grave', as the Beveridge Report stated in 1942, leading to Clement Attlee's government founding of the welfare state, which Loach himself eulogises and mourns in *Spirit of '45*. What both Daniel's speech and Geoff's comments display is class consciousness, pride, dignity and what Gramsci termed 'good sense' (1999: 634). This is the part of common sense that does not get co-opted hegemonically in the service of capital; for Gramsci, the discourses of, for example, privatisation, outsourcing, subject-as-client as presented as

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common sense by neoliberal governments would therefore not be 'good sense'. The latter is 'a conception of the world with an ethic that conforms to its structure' (Gramsci 1999: 660): community, connection, duty and fairness.

However, this does not detract from the fact that the films are suffused with capitalist realism, haunted by the ghosts of the system that the revolutionaries of Loach's generation had wanted to destroy. While the struggles in Spain and Ireland were against fascism and imperialism, Badiou and Loach's generation of the left that reached its political zenith in 1968 railed against the iniquities of social democracy, which effectively in its Keynesian incarnation was the social and economic response of the majority of the ruling class to the specific conditions of the post-war period. This is not to denigrate the many gains of the post-war Labour government; instead, it explains why the Conservative governments that followed it for the next thirteen years did not seek to reverse the majority of them. Angie is a proponent of the common sense of neoliberalism, and does not realise that her situation has very specific causes, instead choosing to see it as a natural consequence of her class. The Marxian credo that social being determines consciousness does not just refer to how an individual responds to a concrete situation, but how class consciousness has a material cause. Marx was writing at a time when the onward march of history, while of course contested, seemed to be going in the right direction: by 1989, though, the metanarratives of the Enlightenment and modern periods that had aimed at revolutionising social relations were seen by neoliberalism's proponents as irrelevant to an increasingly saturated and open world: that of capitalist realism.

That being said, I am arguing that since the crisis of 2008, there has been the beginning of a return to division rather than consensus; what Badiou has named 'the mass sign of a reopening of History' (2012: 42) that neoliberalism had thought closed. Where is this in Loach's contemporary-set texts? Loach presents one subject in Angie who has no access to class consciousness, as its base has been removed by thirty years of neoliberalism; in Geoff, one who is mourning it; and in Daniel, one who is both ignorant of its demise and who has no access to its contemporary manifestations. Throughout the film he has been bemused and uncomprehending regarding the world into which sickness has thrown him; he does not understand why the word of an unqualified, contracted-out benefits advisor can trump his doctor's, nor why there is no time limit for receiving an appeal date; he cannot use a computer; he expects the bureaucracy of the state to take him at his word when he tells them he has been looking for work. Of course, Loach's intention here is to tell a story regarding the horrendous effects of current Conservative policy, not to issue a polemic regarding the ways in which such a policy and its proponents can be overcome. Furthermore, the film does fall into the trap of at least tacitly setting up a binary regarding the deserving and undeserving poor: it is at pains to show us

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that Daniel is a good man who helps others, that he does not drink or smoke, is creative, and can be relied upon. This is to provide audiences with a figure of identification, no doubt; however, in the context of decades of headlines regarding 'scroungers', Loach's decision to present the state-enforced decline of such a transparently good man does mean that this binary is reinforced, rather than the system being scrutinised *tout court*.

Angie, on the other hand, is clearly a product of capitalist realism; an unknowing reactive subject in Badiouian terms. Throughout the film, she associates Geoff's politics with poverty, not realising that it is the politics of the 'free world', which she accepts and, in some ways valorises, that have led to his situation. Geoff is the untimely, mournful, despairing subject; as Cathy (Maggie Hussey), Angie's mother, functions as a constant voice of criticism for her, then it is her father to whom she looks for support. When he will not provide her with this, she feels slighted, and responds by attacking his beliefs. The position which she espouses is an example of the way that ideology is made to appear natural, as fact: as stated above, she says to Geoff, 'It's a big world out there. Do you think anyone gives a shit?' He has no response.

Both films are deeply pessimistic: *It's a Free World* concludes with Angie unable to escape the structure of exploitation. All she has achieved is a purportedly higher rung on its ladder. *I, Daniel Blake*, meanwhile, presents dignity, but in death. To consider why, we will return to Badiou's Idea of Communism. If, after the reduction of actually existing socialism to a handful of states, and the consequent period of reaction that begins in the neoliberal period, the task is to '*reestablish the* [communist] *hypothesis in the ideological and militant field*' (Badiou 2009a: 87, his emphasis), then it is clear that the four films examined here do not contribute to that in the present. Specifically, the current manifestation of the crisis has not led to a presentation of the resurrected subject in Loach's work. In the historical films, the failure of the faithful subject is explored, with this failure represented didactically. The time of the subject in these texts is one of a failed anteriority, with the path taken fixed in aspic and not salvageable as praxis for the present; instead, the films are suffused with melancholia predicated on what will have been. The contemporary-set films are mournful, suffused with what might have been. The revolution is no longer achievable, which means the subject can mourn, though what is being mourned is a different object to the one clung to by the faithful subject of the historical films: the world of social democracy, which is what the left turn in the Labour Party is attempting to resurrect.

Fisher suggests that '[c]apitalist realism can only be threatened if it is shown to be in some way inconsistent or untenable; if, that is to say, capitalism's "realism" turns out to be nothing of the sort' (2009: 16). Loach's films set in the time of the most profound crisis of neoliberalism markedly fail in this task, instead choosing to set up a dialectic between the individual and the system.

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The system itself (and indeed the sense of capitalist realism posited by Fisher) is left unexamined politically: what Loach does is present a moral critique, suggesting that Martin O'Shaughnessy's comment that the neoliberal period has been one in which a 'totalising leftist language has been shattered into fragments' (2008: 64) extends into the present for the veteran film-maker, with no new language rooted in the social reality of contemporary Britain employed. The concentration on the individual rather than the collective of the historical films, which is indicative of the path taken by much of the left in the fragmentary period of capitalist realism, leads to the conclusion that not only do his films present revolution as fixed in time past, but they also disavow the most modest forms of systemic change in the here and now.

Notes

1. *Bread and Roses* (2000) is the exception that proves the rule. It is set in the US and concerns janitors fighting for better conditions and the right to unionise. It is notable that the only contemporary-set film of this era that presents the collective struggle by the working class takes place outside the UK.
2. It is worth alerting the reader to the series of debates that took place in the journal *Screen* regarding the efficacy of progressive realism as a form, many of which were predicated upon differing views of this series in terms of just how radical it was. See Caughie 2000 or Fiske 1987 for useful overviews.
3. Badiou does vary what he considers to be the end date of this short century of radicalism. Sometimes he ends it around 1980, when what he refers to as the Red Years waned; sometimes at the end of the Cultural Revolution in China in 1976. From the point of view of the beginning of the neoliberal period, the earlier dates are more useful, whereas from the perspective of the long decline of the left and the beginning of the widespread belief that capitalism is the only way to organise society, the end of the Cold War makes more sense. For an exhaustive analysis of Badiou's politics, see Bosteels 2011.
4. From the point of view of authorial intention, if not the subjects presented in the scene, this scene can be read as typical of the form of left-wing melancholy that Walter Benjamin saw in the 'radical left intelligentsia', one that fused 'constipation and melancholy' (1974: 29/31). Wendy Brown refers to it as 'a mournful, conservative, backward-looking attachment to a feeling, analysis, or relationship that has been rendered thing-like and frozen in the heart of the putative Leftist' (1999: 22).

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